

Memorandum

Date: November 20, 2008

TO: Mayor Gardner and Members of City Council

FROM: Rob Meeks, Chairman, Recreation & Parks Advisory Board

SUBJECT: 2008 Annual Open Space Report

The Recreation & Parks Advisory Board completed its review and is pleased to submit the following, which lists priorities based on community need. Although there is a justifiable concern about the City's current and future budget needs, the money for future open space acquisition comes from existing capital improvement project funds. In addition, there is a capital improvement project for a rectangular athletic field.

Priority One:

There is a shortage of Rectangular Playing Fields. The problem requires teams to practice less often than needed, for shorter periods of time, or on fields that are less than adequate. Last year the Advisory Board recommended that the City look outside the City limits at options for adding new rectangular athletic fields. Staff continues to discuss the possibility of shared use of fields in Arlington and Fairfax Counties in exchange for providing funds to upgrade the fields. For example, the City could help fund lights or synthetic turf for a field in exchange for shared use of the field. Discussions with Arlington have shown some promise, but given the current economic situation in the region this approach to gaining additional field space may take years to bring to fruition.

The shortage of field space is so significant that waiting years to meet the demand is not a viable option. Therefore, the Board, while not abandoning the idea of a shared use of an Arlington or Fairfax field, is recommending a different more expeditious approach to meeting the need for rectangular athletic fields. The new approach calls for concentrating efforts on making better use of land already owned by the City.

Listed below are four options for meeting the need for additional rectangular athletic field space. Two of the options are for parks in the City, one is a school site in Arlington County and one is a park in Fairfax County.

- 1) Madison Park – if the City decides to sell the Pendleton House and the house stays at the current site the lot should be subdivided so that only the minimum amount of land needed to keep the house on a conforming lot should stay with the house. The rest of the property should become part of Madison Park. With the additional land, Madison Park will be large enough to accommodate a second

athletic field. Some of the amenities at the park may need to be moved to another location on site to make the construction of a second field possible. Synthetic turf may also be considered for the fields as the field now is frequently closed due to wet playing conditions.

2) Roberts Park - Even though there is an open grassy area in Roberts Park large enough to support use as a practice field by athletic teams, the Recreation & Parks Department does not currently schedule any organized athletic team practices at Roberts Park because of the lack of off-street parking. Given the severity of the field shortage, the Recreation & Parks Advisory Board strongly recommends that the field at Roberts Park be used as a site for organized athletic team practices effective spring of 2009. In addition, the field should, in the short term, be upgraded with some minor grading and over-seeding. An irrigation system should also be installed. The field should then be maintained and monitored similar to the City's other athletic fields.

Land acquisition adjacent to the park should be a high priority with emphasis first on getting a parcel or parcel(s) that would provide off-street parking. A second priority would be a parcel or easement that would provide pedestrian access to the park from Spring Street or Poplar Drive. Access to the parks is discussed further later in this report, but this serves as a reminder that the issue of open space is one where we should always take a holistic approach. What may appear to be a piecemeal solution can actually be the building blocks of success. In other words, it may take some time before the access issue is perfect at Roberts Park, but that does not mean we should not be ready when the opportunity comes.

3) Kenmore – The Recreation & Parks staff and Arlington County have an initial and basic framework in place for the shared use of the field at Kenmore Middle School in Arlington. Generally, Arlington County and Falls Church would contribute to the cost of installing and maintaining artificial turf on one of the existing fields. The field has ample parking and could be lighted for maximum use. The major drawback to this site is the location. It is located outside the City at a school that can be a challenge to get to and from during rush hour.

4) Larry Graves – This is perhaps the best choice, but it is also the greatest long shot for achieving. The softball fields at Larry Graves Park are greatly underutilized. The City has been trying for several years to no avail to gain greater access to the softball fields for use by Little League baseball. In recent years as the demand for rectangular athletic field space far exceeded the inventory of fields the City has approached Fairfax County about the possibility of converting one or both of the softball fields to a practice rectangular field. At this time it appears that any cooperative agreement with the County to remove one or both of the softball fields and replace them with a rectangular field is unlikely. Although it is unlikely that the County will agree to any changes to the fields at the park in the short term discussions should continue with the County for a

change to take place in the future. Possible changes could be as simple as replacing the softball fields with a soccer field or as significant as installing artificial turf and lights on all the fields. This is a location that the City should continue to monitor, and work on to reach an agreement with the County that would increase the utility of the park for teams needing a rectangular athletic field.

5) Other Alternatives. As mentioned above the City has been trying to pursue a joint venture outside the city to share a field with synthetic turf. Most of those discussions have been with Arlington County. Another creative solution to the chronic lack of field space is to enter into a long term lease arrangement with one of the surrounding jurisdictions. For example, if the City were to arrange with Arlington County to pay an annual sum, (for discussion purposes \$30,000 per year) for the use of Banneker Park for 5 to 10 years – and agree to pick up a share of the maintenance cost as well that could go a long way to solving the problem. The obvious drawback is that the City should not expect to control the land indefinitely and over time the costs could be significant. The plus to this option is that it could provide field space quickly and cheaply for the short term.

The current system of obtaining permits from jurisdictions outside the City is not working as well as it needs to – and one way or another it is clear that if it requires the City to be more aggressive financially to compete for field space then the City must be open to the concept.

Priority Two:

(Note – Transportation committee involvement)

The City should work hard to establish or improve Greenway linkages and connections. Paper streets that can improve or establish linkages should be added to the open space inventory and maintained as parkland. Other small pieces of City owned property that have no formal designation such as the parcel at the end of Chestnut Street should be formally designated as parkland and maintained.

All City Parks should have adequate points of access. Although we achieved some success in this area over the past years with the purchase of 215 S. Lee, both Roberts Park and West End Park do not have adequate access points. Roberts Park discussed above is straightforward. A lot or a portion of a lot on South Spring Street, Poplar Drive, or even Randolph or West Street adjacent to the park should be purchased or an easement acquired that would provide greater access. As mentioned above, Roberts Park should now be used as practice field space – so this is a priority on multiple levels.

For West End Park a lot or easement on Falls Avenue must be obtained to allow access from the street on the west side of the park. The home at 118 Falls Avenue is currently on the market and should be considered for purchase.

Another linkage that should be completed is the continuation of the City's bike trail to run from Cavalier Trail Park to the Tripps Run Trail. Currently the bike route takes bikers on to the street to complete this linkage. A far more desirable route would be possible if the City were to purchase portions of lots or acquire easements over portions of lots that would allow the trail to connect directly to the Tripps Run Trail.

Priority Three

The City should pursue the expansion of existing parks to increase the viability of a park, protect natural resources, improve access or to provide parking for a park. As noted earlier parcels adjacent to Roberts Park should be considered for off street parking, or improved access.

Successes for the Year:

Crossman Park, improved and expanded the park with the acquisition of 3,000 square feet at 411 E. Jefferson Street.

In closing the Recreation & Parks Advisory Board appreciates Council's support of the open space acquisition efforts. It is important to stay proactive on this front and to that end the Board hopes Council will authorize staff to pursue properties, easements or agreements that help meet the priority needs stated above. The Board would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this report in greater detail at a works session with Council in January. Should you have any questions or need additional information please let me know.